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ABSTRACT

Some insights into the nature of functional grammar can be useful for teachers of composition. There are four ways that functional grammar stands in opposition to common linguistics in the United States. First, for functionalists (those practicing functional grammar), the starting point is with kinds of meanings, not with kinds of structures; the movement then is toward the ways in which meanings can be realized in various kinds of structures. Second, functionalists study samples of language that people have actually used for a real purpose in the world, not sentences that they have made up. Third, functionalists focus on connected texts and how aspects of those texts can affect the structure of sentences; they study language in context, not in isolated sentences. Fourth, functionalists look at the social contexts of a particular text, that is, its purpose and the relationship assumed between the reader and writer. Of these four practices, it is the third one that seems to yield the most applications in the classroom. An attention to how sentences are connected in texts is a very useful way of helping students to notice how they are putting sentences together. One exercise centering on given and new information involves having students examine their written products to see if they have expressed given information before new. Another exercise involves having students use their knowledge of given and new information to check on the cohesion and coherence of paragraphs and longer prose stretches. (TB)

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# Rhetorical or Functional Grammar and the Teaching of Composition

CCCC, March 27, 1996

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My task in the next few minutes is to explore the nature of functional grammar briefly and to touch on some insights available from functional grammar that are useful for teachers of composition. To begin, I would like to present a very short list of some work in or closely related to functional grammar. The following four works are good introductions to the theoretical foundations of functional grammar: (1) Danes, F. ed. *Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective*. The Hague: Mouton, 1974; (2) Dik, S. *Studies in Functional Grammar*. New York: Academic Press, 1980; (3) Givón, T. *Functionalism and Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Company, 1995; and (4) Halliday, M.A.K. *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. 2nd ed. London: Edward Arnold, 1994. The writers of these works are more closely associated with Great Britain, Australia, the Netherlands, or what was once called Czechoslovakia than they are with the United States, and their work is probably more widely known abroad than it is in the United States. More and more, however, these writers are finding interested readers in the United States. The theoretician whom I depend on the most and whom I will refer to most often below is Halliday.

In addition to the works on theory, I would like to list four works related to research and pedagogy that draw on functional grammar: (1) Couture, B., ed. *Functional Approaches to Writing: Research Perspectives*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex, 1986; (2) Kolln, M. *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects*. 2nd ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1996; (3) Noguchi, R.R. *Grammar and the Teaching of Writing: Limits and Possibilities*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1991; and (4) Vande Kopple, W. *Clear and Coherent Prose:*

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*A Functional Approach*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1989. These works, to varying degrees, show how insights from functional grammar can usefully inform the teaching of such subjects as usage, grammar, punctuation, style, and textual coherence.

Having given some information about the kinds of writers and works that I am speaking about, I would now like to discuss briefly four characteristics of functional grammar that I believe will appeal to teachers of rhetoric and composition. And we will see that in some ways these characteristics stand in opposition to emphases common in linguistics in the United States.

The first of these characteristics is sometimes called the "Form-function Relationship." Functionalists generally believe that language has the structure it does largely because of the functions it fulfills or the kinds of meanings it conveys. This emphasis stands in contrast to much of what is done in linguistics in the United States. In the United States many linguists study forms and patterns of forms and then try to relate those forms to meanings. With functionalists, the starting point is with kinds of meanings, not with kinds of structures, and the movement then is toward the ways in which those meanings can be realized in various kinds of structures.

Halliday, for example, starts with three very general kinds of meaning that he says language conveys. In the first place, he says that language conveys ideational meaning, which is meaning that represents states of affairs in the outside world and within speakers' and writers' minds. Second, he says that language conveys interpersonal meaning, which is meaning that signals what action one person is performing on others and how that person would like the relationships between himself or herself and the others to be construed. Finally, Halliday says that language conveys textual meaning, which is meaning that signals how sentences are related in what readers or listeners would regard as connected texts and how those texts relate to the contexts of their production and use.

To show in detail how each of these kinds of meaning is realized within a clause (which

is the unit that Halliday focuses his studies of realization on) would demand more time than I have available to me, particularly since some elements of clauses can simultaneously realize more than one kind of meaning. I can only generalize by saying that ideational meaning is usually realized by elements of transitivity, elements that indicate who did what to whom in what circumstances; that interpersonal meaning is typically realized in the selection of mood and in the use of markers of modality (such as *perhaps*); and that textual meaning is commonly realized in text connectives (such as *however*). The important point here is that functionalists generally start with ideas about kinds of meaning that language conveys, and then they work toward discovering the ways in which those meanings can manifest themselves.

To the second characteristic of functional grammar I would give the title "Natural Language." If linguists do in fact focus on how people use language to convey meanings, then they will almost always want to study samples of language that people have actually used for a real purpose in the world. Therefore, if you read around in the work of functionalists, chances are very good that the linguistic examples you encounter will have come from real people in actual contexts. This practice stands in contrast, of course, to the practice of some linguists in the United States of examining sentences that they have made up and have never used for any purpose other than that of exemplifying a particular structure or structural contrast.

The third characteristic of functional grammar that I will focus on can carry the caption "In the Light of Discourse." If linguists study natural language, perhaps especially natural written language, they will be led to focus on connected texts and on how aspects of those texts can affect the structure of sentences. For instance, how one begins and ends a sentence in a text depends to a great extent on what has been expressed in that text up to the point of that sentence. This functionalist stress on texts or discourses and their characteristics and effects again stands in contrast to practices of some linguists in the United States, linguists who focus almost exclusively on isolated sentences without thinking about the textual context that those sentences might appear in.

Finally, the fourth characteristic of functional grammar that I would like to focus on can carry the title "Contexts." In this area, as in many others, functionalists need to do additional work and more refined work, but if you examine their work on sentences and texts, you will soon notice that they attempt to relate those sentences and texts to the social contexts of the sentences' and texts' use. Thus they ask questions about how a text can be affected if the readers for it can be assumed to know a great deal or very little about the subject of the text, about what kinds of social roles are negotiated between writer and reader as the text is processed, about exactly what kind of action the writer of the text is engaged in by writing and using the text, and about what ideology that action is probably rooted in. This characteristic, too, stands in contrast to the work of some linguists in the United States, for they examine examples of language while paying very little or no attention to the possible or actual contexts of use of those examples.

Halliday sums up well what are probably strong attractions of these characteristics of functional grammar for teachers of rhetoric or composition: "In general, therefore, the [functional] approach leans towards the applied rather than the pure, the rhetorical rather than the logical, the actual rather than the ideal, the functional rather than the formal, the text rather than the sentence" (*An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 2nd ed., p. xxvii).

The function of language or the kind of meaning that I have attended to most in my work with composition classes is the function that Halliday calls the textual function. This function or kind of meaning, as noted above, signals how sentences are connected in texts and how texts relate to their contexts. Within the textual domain, I have spent most of my time examining and teaching about views of given and new information within sentences or, more precisely, within independent clauses.

Various definitions of given and new information within clauses exist, but in my composition classes I use rather uncomplicated ones. I tell students that given information in a clause includes those elements that are repeated from earlier clauses, that are related by means

of common reference to earlier elements but appear in truncated form (as when a writer moves from Queen Elizabeth in one sentence to she in the next), that are inferable from elements that appear earlier (as when a writer moves from The old blue car in one sentence to Its steering wheel in the next), or that refer to unique things known to all people with normal experience of the world (as when a writer uses references like the moon).

New information in a clause is information that is not repeated form earlier sentences, that is not related by means of common reference to earlier elements, that is not inferable on the basis of material in earlier sentences, and that does not refer to unique things known to all with normal experience of the world.

The normal patterning of given and new information within clauses in English has the given information expressed before the new. Often the complete grammatical subject expresses given information, and the complete grammatical predicate expresses new information. This is true, for example, of the second of the following two sentences:

Jim is not at home. He took a trip to Madrid.

In the second sentence, He expresses given information and took a trip to Madrid conveys new information. This pattern allows readers first to make a connection between the material in a sentence and material they have processed earlier and then to add the new information at the appropriate spot in their memories. Since given information usually requires fewer words for its expression than does new information, clauses in English that do move from given to new information will therefore also move from short to long, that is, from relatively shorter constituents to relatively longer ones. Or alternatively, one could say that if a writer has expressed the new information after the given, he or she has conformed to the principle of "end-weight" for English clauses, with the heaviest or most informative elements at the end of the clause.

I regularly use two exercises centering on given and new information in my composition classes. One of these involves having students examine their written products to

see if in their sentences they have expressed the given information before the new. I find that many students often write sentences that move from new information to given, perhaps because they are concerned with coming up with new information and are eager to express it or because they have overextended bits of advice about varying the beginning of their sentences.

I have them check the ends of their sentences to see if they have left there expressions that clearly convey given information. The expressions like this that I see most often in students' writing include or resemble these: still another, some of these, the second solution, and a similar problem. Here are two sentences from some of my former students with expressions like this at their end; these clearly move from new information to given information:

> "Speaking to unbelievers through tongues of a known or unknown language and having the speaking interpreted is another way this can be accomplished."
>
> "The possibility for children to work and develop at their own pace is the fourth advantage for home-schoolers."

When students find such sentences in their prose, I like to ask them if they think these sentences can be revised without turning the sentences into extremely clumsy constructions. Occasionally students will be able to make a good case for leaving a sentence alone, even if it does move from new to given information, because to switch the given and new information around would result in a very awkward sentence. That is precisely the kind of thinking and justifying that I hope my students will come more and more to be able to do. Frequently, though, students will admit that they could quite easily and felicitously revise their sentences so that they do move from given to new information. This is true of the two sentences cited above:

> Another way this can be accomplished is speaking to unbelievers through tongues of a known or unknown language and having the speaking interpreted.
>
> The fourth advantage for home-schoolers is the possibility for children to work and

develop at their own pace.

The other exercise I regularly use is to have students use their knowledge of given and new information to check on the cohesion and the coherence of paragraphs and longer stretches of prose. I ask them to select a piece that they have been working on, and then I have them underline or list on a separate piece of paper the first six or seven words in each sentence or the complete grammatical subject in each sentence. If they have used sentence subjects to express bits of given information, then the list of the first six or seven words or of the grammatical subjects should include a set of phrases that very much hang together, that form a coherent set.

Here is a paragraph that one of my former students tried this technique on:

> "Light rock-and-roll can be as comforting to a college student as classical music can be to a professor. Most radio stations play light rock and roll. Themes about sex, alcohol, and violence come up in the lyrics of light rock-and-roll. But country music deals with sex, alcohol and violence too."

The student chose to list the complete grammatical subjects:

> "Light rock-and-roll"
>
> "Most radio stations"
>
> "Themes about sex, alcohol, and violence"
>
> "country music."

This is certainly not the most incoherent set of sentence subjects that one could imagine. But as the student examined this list and the paragraph from which these subjects came, he realized that he had missed some chances to connect the beginnings of sentences to material expressed earlier. Thus he revised his paragraph as follows (with the bits of given information italicized):

> "Light rock-and-roll can be as comforting to a college student as classical music can be to a professor. *Light rock-and-roll* is played on most radio stations. *The lyrics of light rock-and-roll* bring up themes about sex, alcohol, and violence. But *these themes*

come up in country music too.

I would not claim that this paragraph could not benefit from further revision. However, the sentences now move from given to new information, not the other way around, and this version of the paragraph is much more cohesive, and probably more coherent, than the first version.

The exercises that I have illustrated here are just two of many possible that are associated with knowledge of given and new information (see my Clear and Coherent Prose for others). And given and new information is associated with just one of the three general functions or kinds of meaning that Halliday identifies. Thus I am confident that as teachers of composition and rhetoric explore Halliday's and others' functional grammars, they will find much that should help them work with their students on matters important to composing.